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Don't Take This Risk to Health Sitting Down!

**By Melanie Reynolds
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I was sitting at my desk the other day when I came across an article about the serious harm that prolonged sitting can do to health.

I'd like to report that I leapt to my feet and hurled my desk chair into a closet. But the fact is, like many people these days, I have an office job that tends to tie me to a chair. I conduct much of my business on the phone, at the computer, or in meetings. It seems like I use my backside as much as my brain.

Helena has a lot of jobs like mine. As many as 10,000 government workers alone (about a third of the county workforce) are likely to be parked at desks on a given day. So sitting presents a significant threat to public health in Lewis and Clark County. Some go so far as to call it "the new smoking."

Exercise Not an Antidote

Given all we've heard about the importance of physical activity, this may not seem like front page news. Health experts have been exhorting us for years to get at least half an hour of moderate exercise five days a week.

But several recent studies have shown that sitting for many hours a day can shave years off our lives *even if* we hit the gym on the way home for a lengthy, sweat-inducing workout.

"Exercise is not a perfect antidote for sitting," an "inactivity researcher" with Pennington Biomedical Research Center has been quoted as saying. So while that workout is good for your health, it may not undo hours of sitting at a desk or in front of the TV.

What researchers have concluded is that sitting and lack of exercise are two separate behaviors, each of which contributes on its own to poor health.

Harmful Effects of Sitting

According to that inactivity researcher, when we sit for long periods, “the muscles go as silent as those of a dead horse.”

When muscles don’t contract, they require less fuel. The surplus, in the form of blood sugar, accumulates in the bloodstream, where it contributes to a risk of diabetes and other health concerns.

Researchers have also linked sitting for long hours to:

- Joint pain
- Poor mood
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Obesity
- Heart disease
- Cancer

A long-term study by the American Cancer Society found that men who spent six or more hours a day sitting had an overall death rate about 20 percent higher than men who sat for three hours or less. The death rate for women who sat more than six hours a day was about 40 percent higher.

Another study, in Australia, found that the risk of dying rose 11 percent with each additional hour of television a person sat and watched per day. This was after taking into account other factors, like age, gender, smoking, high blood pressure, body mass index, and exercise level.

Just this month, Swedish researchers published a study that offers an explanation for why sitting may be associated with poor health. They found that spending time on our feet appears to lengthen bits of DNA called telomeres. Sitting causes them to shorten and kills cells.

Telomeres stop chromosomes from fraying or clumping together and scrambling the genetic code they contain, the researchers noted. Exercise didn’t affect their length.

“This study adds a missing snippet to the tale by noting a direct correlation between reduced sitting time each day and increased telomere length,” said a Yale University researcher not associated with the study. “Long telomeres are good – long hours sitting, not so much.”

Health experts recommend a twofold approach to improving health: sitting less and moving more.

Reducing Time on the Tush

So what’s a poor desk jockey to do? Office workers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, spend 65 to 75 percent of their workday sitting. Standing up and throwing in the towel is generally not an option.

Here are some more practical suggestions for reducing your sitting time, at home and work:

- Aim to sit no longer than 30 minutes without getting up at least briefly.

- Use a standing desk at work. Some of our employees have started doing this, and they report liking it. If that sounds too drastic, there are desks that can be adjusted easily for standing or sitting.
- Create reminders to sit less. Stand up whenever you're on the phone, for example. Or take a brisk walk around the building every time you need to use the rest room or grab a cup of coffee.
- Stand up during meetings. If you move to the side or back of the room, no one is likely to be disturbed. You may even start a new – and healthy – trend.
- Walk to a co-worker's desk rather than emailing or calling.
- Hold standing or walking meetings.
- Stand to check emails and text messages on your cell phone.
- If you can't miss your favorite TV show, get up and walk around the house during commercials.

The bottom line is, human beings were designed to move. The more we do, the better we'll feel.

Okay, I feel a strong need to push away from my computer and dash outside for a 5-minute walk. I hope to see you out there!